



John Ryan

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## Can Friedrich Merz navigate Germany's fragmented political landscape?

*A grand coalition between the CDU/CSU and SPD is widely expected in Germany. Yet as John Ryan argues, there are serious questions about whether the new coalition will be able to respond to the multiple challenges facing the country.*

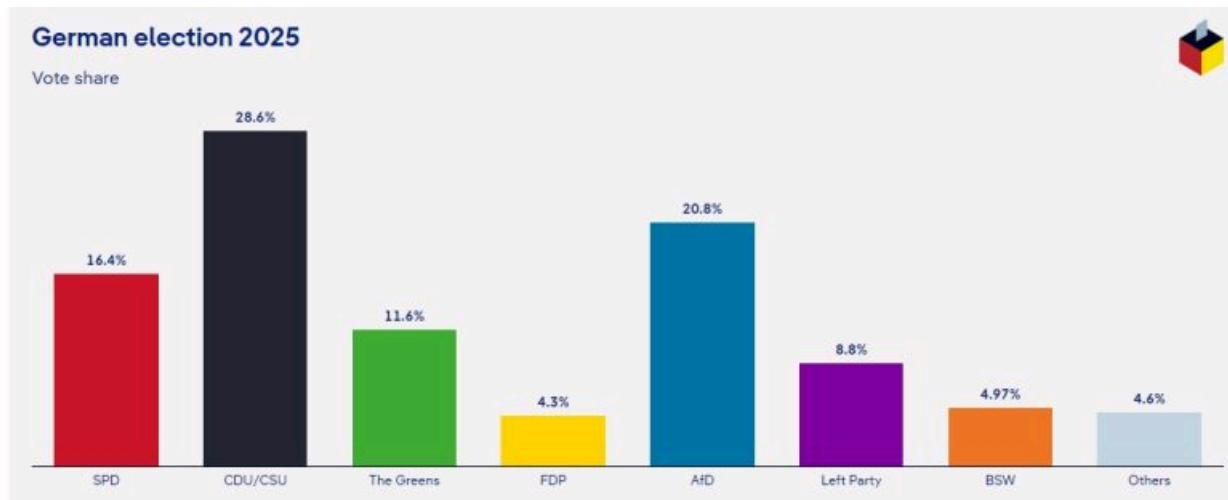
Friedrich Merz may have emerged as the winner of Germany's federal election, with the mandate to form the next coalition government. Underneath though, lies a brittle and highly fragmented political landscape. Will the established party system led by an expected grand coalition of CDU and SPD hold up against the multiple pressures faced by the German economic and political system? Or is it only a matter of time until the true winners in the election on the far right and left take on the battle for leadership?

## The rise of the AfD

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, received 28.8% of the vote. This was by all accounts a disappointing result considering the unpopularity of the traffic light coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and the liberal FDP.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) received 20.8% of the vote, doubling its 2021 result. Chancellor Olaf Scholz's SPD had a catastrophic result at around 16.4%. The Greens and the FDP, the two junior partners in Scholz's failed coalition, reached 11.6% and 4.3% respectively. The Left party (Die Linke) was the other big winner with 8.8% and Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) at 4.97% just failed to make it into the Bundestag (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Results of the 2025 German federal election**



Source: *The Federal Returning Officer*

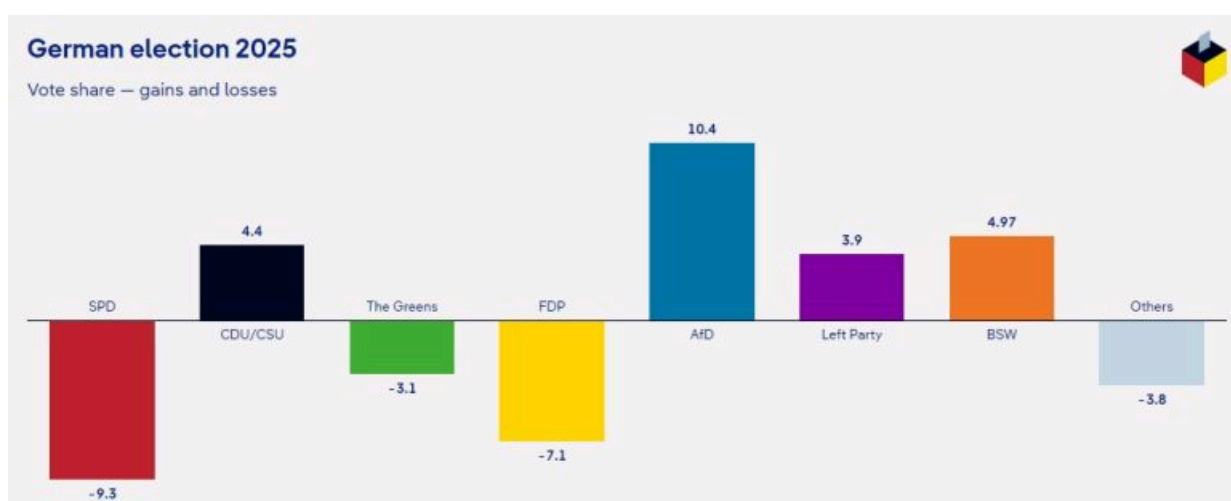
In my travels prior to the election in Berlin/Brandenburg, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland and Rhineland Pfalz, signs of the poor state of the German economy were evident everywhere. Concerns over immigration and a sense of growing social injustice gave a foreboding that voters were going to penalise the governing coalition which had collapsed on 6 November 2024.

The AfD won five former regional states of the old East Germany. But their success is no longer confined to the East. They made serious inroads in the West and South of Germany and came first in votes in Kaiserslautern (25.9%) and Gelsenkirchen (24.7%), places that have seriously deteriorated over the last decade since my last visits. It came second in another 110 West German constituencies, all of which were won by the CDU/CSU.

## A fragmented landscape

The 84% voter turnout was the highest since German unification. A few important observations: the three parties of the collapsed SPD, Green and FDP coalition lost some 19.5 percentage points of their 2021 votes. At the same time, the parties of the extreme right (AfD) and left (Die Linke and BSW) increased their share of the popular vote to 34.5% from 15.3% in 2021 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Change in vote share between the 2021 and 2025 German federal elections



Source: *The Federal Returning Officer*

Merz's CDU had the second weakest result ever, and the SPD had its worst result ever. The four parties of the political centre – the CDU/CSU, SPD, Greens and FDP – received almost 90% of the votes in 2002; today their share did not reach much above 60%.

The German political landscape has become more fragmented than ever. Taken together, the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats polled just 44.9%, or around half of what they achieved back in 1980 (87.4%). The AfD is clearly extending its reach from its base in eastern Germany to the west: in the old industrial heartlands of North Rhine-Westphalia, for instance, it won 16.8% to the SPD's 20% and the CDU's 30.1%.

The rise of the AfD happened in just over a decade. Founded in February 2013, it did not have any seats in the Bundestag until 2017, when it more than doubled its support to 12.6% and burst into parliament with 94 members. At the last election, the party fell back to 10.4% and 83 seats, but the current result places it second only to the CDU/CSU. No longer at the fringes and with a fifth of the vote, it has broken through with 152 seats.

The AfD not only made significant gains geographically in the west but also demographically among younger voters: it came second with 21% among 16-24-year-olds, just behind the Left party on 25%, first among 25-34-year-olds with 23% and among 35-44-year-olds, with 26%.

## Another grand coalition

The three recent grand coalitions of CDU/CSU and SPD headed by Angela Merkel (2005-09, 2013-17 and 2018-2021) were not notable for economic reform or innovation but, rather, **sluggish growth and business decline** plus, in many eyes, unmanaged immigration.

There is little prospect of a short-term revival in Germany's stagnating economy or stronger European leadership in crucial security issues during the most crisis-ridden period in the Federal Republic's 80-year post-Second World War history. Fragmentation of the popular vote, personal animosity among potential coalition partners and deep divisions over economic, social, energy, defence and immigration policies will impede Friedrich Merz's task of assembling a cohesive government with the SPD.

Together, the CDU/CSU and SPD have 328 seats in the Bundestag, 12 more than needed for a majority. This is an acceptable, though not great margin. Hence, a CDU-led government with Merz and the SPD as the smaller coalition partner seems almost guaranteed, despite rumblings within the SPD.

This, to be clear, is not a coalition formed out of enthusiasm or political compatibility, but mainly a lack of alternatives. Various currents in the SPD party are calling for a **membership vote** on the

subject of a coalition with the CDU/CSU, which could make cooperation with Merz fall through. Merz on the other hand has the task to build a coalition with a party that has been discredited during four years in power, abandoned by a third of its supporters and now supported by only one person out of every seven in Germany. That does not bode well for the future of the coalition.

The shock that the election result delivered to the German political system is deep and shows that if the established parties do not listen to their increasingly angry and frustrated electorates, voters will find other parties better suited for them. No political party can take its voters for granted. Those that do harm not just themselves but erode trust in democracy itself.

## The challenge for Merz

Germany faces major economic readjustment. The country's supply-chain and automotive industries, which are major elements of the economy, are set to decline. This is exacerbated by demographic pressures and the need to secure more money for defence and security to respond to **Donald Trump's pivot away from Europe**.

What exactly have these parties defined as viable economic strategies during the campaign in the face of this major change of circumstances that have in any way been convincing? And there are more questions to ask. Does the German political class understand how bad things are? Do they understand how poorly Germany is prepared for the multiple challenges ahead? Do they grasp how run down and incapable they have allowed their state to become?

Germany has suffered the collapse of its long-standing "business model" – relying on trade with China, cheap energy from Russia and security guarantees from the US. It is difficult to see a CDU-SPD coalition working together to modernise the German economy or offer the leadership that is urgently required.

Early indications are that Merz is willing to move fast on some of those questions. The withdrawal of support for Ukraine by the Trump administration is forcing his hand with regards to defence spending. Merz has **struck a deal with the Social Democrats** to effectively bypass a constitutional cap on the budget deficit.

The plan will largely exempt defence spending from the so-called debt brake and include a €500 billion special fund for infrastructure spending over the next 10 years. This deal must pass in the Bundestag. The CDU/CSU and SPD will need a two-thirds majority in the Bundestag and will need 46 of the 69 possible votes in the Bundesrat. This will be possible with the support of the Greens in both cases. If this happens then it looks like Germany is finally taking steps to resolve the leadership vacuum in Europe.

However, if the CDU/CSU and SPD coalition fails, the AfD, the Left party, the Greens and the BSW will be ready to take advantage in the 2029 election or sooner if the latest iteration of the grand

coalition breaks up. The true shock waves may not yet have reached the shores of Germany's troubled politics.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Achim Wagner](#) / [Shutterstock.com](#)*

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